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SUBJECT: COMMANDER, U.S. PACIFIC FLEET KICKSTARTS NAVAL
COOPERATION WITH NEW INITIATIVES BETWEEN U.S. NAVY AND
PEOPLE'S NAVY

Classified By: DCM Jonathan M. Aloisi.
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) During a recent visit to Hanoi and Hai Phong, Vietnam, the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Gary Roughead, proposed a range of new initiatives intended to broaden U.S.-Vietnam naval cooperation, including cooperation in the fields of Meteorological-Oceanographic (METOC) prediction and Search and Rescue (SAR) coordination. He also put forth a number of modest ideas to foster contact between junior and mid-grade naval officers of both countries, including ship-rider opportunities and offers for Vietnamese naval officers to observe maritime training events within regional bilateral and multilateral exercises, such as the annual Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) exercise. Favorable reactions to these proposals by civilian and military interlocutors suggested that Vietnam is ready to begin naval cooperation in earnest, if at a tentative and measured pace. End Summary

2. (C) From January 21-24, the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Gary Roughead, visited Hanoi and Hai Phong, Vietnam during the first leg of a regional trip to Southeast Asia. During this visit, he called on the Commander of the People's Navy (Vice Admiral Nguyen Van Hien), Deputy Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant General Nguyen Duc Soat, and Vice Foreign Minister (VFM) Le Van Bang. He also visited the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Institute for International Relations (IIR), the People's Navy Medical Institute, and the Hai Long Shipyard. Admiral Roughead also conducted two press events with members of the domestic and international media corps while in Hanoi.

Promoting cooperation and coordination

3. (C) During his call on VADM Hien, Admiral Roughead proposed a broad range of initiatives to boost cooperation between the U.S. Navy and People's Navy of Vietnam. Specifically, he suggested further METOC cooperation, as well as expanded efforts to develop the capacity of both countries to work together in SAR activities. He also recommended that

the People's Navy send personnel as observers during regional maritime exercises, and that it consider a limited ship-rider program in conjunction with upcoming U.S. Navy port visits. For his part, VADM Hien expressed interest in these ideas, but he also clearly stated that the General Staff would have to consider and approve any new activity before the People's Navy would be permitted to participate.

¶4. (C) During a reception immediately following the official call, VADM Hien took the opportunity to extensively question Admiral Roughead about the training and retention of U.S. Navy personnel, especially those with technical qualifications. It was clear from the tone and content of the questions that the current system of recruitment, training and retention employed by the People's Navy may be proving itself inadequate for satisfying the needs of a modernizing force, and that the People's Navy leadership may be interested in considering new paradigms. While both the call and dinner were pleasant, VADM Hien was typically non-committal across the board, preferring instead to recommend that Admiral Roughead take up his proposals with Lieutenant General Nguyen Duc Soat later in the visit.

¶5. (C) Although the meeting between Admiral Roughead and VFM Le Van Bang was brief, several substantive issues were discussed, including future possible cooperation in the areas of METOC prediction and warning, SAR assistance and training and a possible future role for the Vietnamese as observers in regional maritime exercises, such as CARAT. Admiral Roughead also suggested future military medical activities in the sphere of humanitarian assistance/disaster relief in Vietnam as a possible area for future cooperation. VFM Le Van Bang indicated that these were areas where increased cooperation

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was both possible and desirable, but he requested more detail be provided, especially with regard to opportunities for Vietnamese officers to observe maritime exercises. He also indicated that Vietnam would be interested in receiving more information from the United States about maritime shipping activity in the South China Sea.

¶6. (C) While expressing confidence that the developing U.S.-Vietnam relationship would continue to grow, VFM Le Van Bang stated his belief that Vietnam's share of the current budget for the International Military Education and Training (IMET) program was too small. Finally, he asked for U.S. assistance in support of Vietnam's efforts to develop its infrastructure. Specifically, he noted the need to build a modern multilane north-south highway, additional north-south rail lines, schools and hospitals.

¶7. (C) Following the call on VFM Le Van Bang, Admiral Roughead met with several IIR staff members for a spirited roundtable discussion. For about an hour, IIR faculty questioned the Admiral about U.S. views concerning the rise of China, the potential impact of Chinese military power on the balance of power in Asia, U.S. perceptions about strategic threats in the region, and the future role of Vietnam in maintaining security in the region. Some of the faculty's questions highlighted their misgivings about the potential impact of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) on Vietnam's national sovereignty and how a lack of enforcement capacity could hamper Vietnam's decision to eventually participate. Admiral Roughead's responses to these inquiries expressed a view that perhaps had not received a lot of previous consideration by many of the roundtable participants. Specifically, he noted that U.S. maritime strategy in the region was principally driven by a post 9/11 outlook more than concerns over expanding Chinese military influence. He noted that the vulnerability of maritime shipping and sea lanes of communication (SLOC) to non-state actors had the potential to cause far more harm to nations than the military threat posed by any traditional military power. He also noted that regional cooperation to contain trafficking in weapons, drugs and persons and to

respond to crises, such as natural and manmade disasters, would strengthen the security of the entire international community, and help foster everyone's economic prosperity.

18. (C) During his call on Lieutenant General Nguyen Duc Soat, who concurrently serves as both a Deputy Chief of the General Staff and the standing Vice-Chairman of the National Committee for Search and Rescue (NCSR), Admiral Roughead again presented a lengthy list of potential areas where U.S.-Vietnam mil-mil relations could be expanded, including METOC, SAR, medical cooperation, disaster relief, ship-rider and exercise-observer opportunities. LTGEN Soat was more definitive in his responses than most of his MoD colleagues were during this visit. He implied a willingness to consider the possibility of a future limited U.S. SAR exercise in concert with Vietnam SAR forces. LTGEN Soat also indicated a desire for Vietnam to participate as an observer in the 2007 CARAT exercise. Vietnam must first indicate which country they desire to observe, and U.S. Pacific Fleet will then initiate the process of gaining approval from the host country. With regard to METOC, LTGEN Soat expressed satisfaction about what had been achieved so far, but he asked for increased assistance in developing the necessary communications infrastructure within Vietnam to receive, process and disseminate METOC and Tsunami warning information from the United States. He also appealed for greater medical cooperation between the People's Army and Pacific Command, and specifically asked for support for the Medical Branch of the People's Navy.

19. (C) Like VFM Le Van Bang, LTGEN Soat also voiced his opinion that Vietnam's share of the IMET budget was inadequate to fully capitalize on the growing mil-mil relationship. Finally, LTGEN Soat noted that PACOM's humanitarian assistance projects in central Vietnam had left a very good impression among the people, and that continued efforts to improve Vietnam's SAR and disaster prevention and

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response capacity would further strengthen the people's view that the United States is a trusted friend of Vietnam.

One visit...two visits...three visits...more?

110. (C) During an evening reception hosted by the U.S. Ambassador, Admiral Roughead had the opportunity to discuss at length future ship-visit opportunities with Senior Colonel Nguyen Hong Quan, a Deputy Director of the Ministry of Defense's External Relations Department (ERD). The Admiral proposed a number of ship visits for this year, specifically a routine port visit and a visit by a hydrographic vessel. SRCOL Quan also raised the idea of a visit by a humanitarian mission embarked aboard USS PELELIU (LHA 5). Pacific Fleet is currently in the planning stages for a mission of this type to Southeast Asia for later this year. While reiterating that the number of port visits by foreign warships is limited to one event per year by Government Decree No. 55/CP (1 October 1996), SRCOL Quan also indicated that it might be possible to work through other ministries, such as the Ministry of Transportation, to coordinate specialized visits by the hydrographic and medical missions. SRCOL Quan also noted that these visits should be conducted to any of Vietnam's seven recognized international ports. With respect to a potential visit by the USS PELELIU, SRCOL Quan stated that requests to use ship-based helicopters to ferry personnel and equipment ashore would likely not be viewed favorably. He also was clear that such visits must be limited to seven days or less, which is also a requirement that is stipulated in Government Decree No. 55/CP (Article 10 of Government Decree No. 55/CP also states that the GVN may make exceptions to this policy on a case by case basis). SRCOL Quan suggested that any medical mission should ideally be focused on the central region where much of PACOM's humanitarian assistance has been carried out in past years. Pacific Fleet has proposed a visit window for consideration,

and USDAO is currently soliciting a GVN response.

Hai Phong Visit

¶11. (C) On 23 January, Admiral Roughead drove to Hai Phong for visits to the People's Navy Medical Institute and the Hai Long Shipyard. The People's Navy Medical Institute is responsible for providing top-tier medical treatment for the entire People's Navy, as well as for conducting specialized research into illnesses and diseases related to naval operations. It is located on the outskirts of Hai Pong city in dilapidated facilities constructed in the mid-1970s; however, new facilities are currently under construction in Hai Phong City and some operations will be moved to the new compound in late 2007.

¶12. (C) Senior Captain Nguyen Minh Phuong, the director of the People's Navy Medical Institute, provided an overview brief of the institute and its planned relocation, and she also recommended a number of areas for future U.S. Navy-People's Navy medical cooperation, most of which concerned training and equipment augmentation. She also suggested that a team of People's Navy medical staff be invited to tour U.S. Navy medical facilities in the United States. During a brief tour of the facilities, SRCAPT Phuong specifically pointed out a Soviet-made pressure chamber that the institute had received in 1967. She noted that this chamber and two other mobile ones are all that are currently owned by the People's Navy Medical Branch, and she expressed her concern that they would not be operable for much longer. She made it clear that she hoped that the United States would be able to assist in augmenting these assets, while also providing access to the training and resources that would improve the institute's ability to provide medical care, especially in specialized areas such as the treatment of diving-related illnesses. Finally, she made an appeal for any medical equipment that could be used to outfit the new medical facilities being built by the People's Navy.

¶13. (C) The final visit of the trip was to the Hai Long

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Shipyard, one of a dozen or so ship construction and repair facilities currently operated by the People's Navy throughout Vietnam. This particular shipyard competes for both government and commercial contracts, and most recently is in the final stage of completing the last of seven SAR boats being built for Vietnam's Maritime Police. The director of the company, Senior Captain Bach Thanh Cong, expressed great pride that the Commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet had chosen to pay his company a visit, and enthusiastically discussed the company's plans to expand its operations in the next few years to be able to not only build larger ships, but to also increase the rate of construction. He also noted that they were considering equitization of the company in the near future. While not directly related to the proposals for expanded naval cooperation discussed during the preceding meetings, the visit to Hai Long Shipyard was instructive in providing insights into the state of Vietnam's military ship-building and repair capabilities.

¶14. (C) The visit concluded with a dinner hosted by the Deputy Commander and Chief of Staff of the People's Navy, Rear Admiral Pham Ngoc Minh. During the dinner, RADM Minh and his staff took the opportunity to again extensively question Admiral Roughead about life in the U.S. Navy and the myriad training opportunities and benefits that U.S. sailors and naval officers receive. RADM Minh was so caught up in the discussion and Admiral Roughead's frank responses to his inquiries that he had to be reminded twice that the dinner had concluded.

¶15. (C) Admiral Roughead departed Hai Phong the next morning aboard a U.S. military aircraft for Phnom Penh. This is itself notable as Hai Phong's Cat Bi airport is not generally

considered an international airport and special permission had to be sought not only to land and depart from this facility with a U.S. military aircraft, but to make an international departure from a domestic airport. The willingness of the Vietnamese authorities to accommodate these requests indicates the importance they attached to this visit.

Embassy Comment

¶16. (C) This was a useful visit that may be looked back upon as the event that kicked off a previously stagnant and heretofore unproductive relationship between the U.S. Navy and the People's Navy. A number of important initiatives were proposed by Admiral Roughead, most of which seem to have appealed in principle to his Vietnamese interlocutors. While it is difficult to predict the pace with which these initiatives can be put into place, it is clear that Vietnam's military and civilian leadership see value in expanded naval cooperation, even if that cooperation will remain limited to certain predictable sectors for the foreseeable future. However, greater cooperation with the People's Navy represents an important milestone in a relationship that has until now seen limited mil-mil cooperation only with Hanoi-based military organizations, such as the Engineering Command (demining), the Military Medical Department (PEPFAR), and the Foreign Language Training School (IMET).

¶17. (SBU) This cable has been cleared by COMPACFLT.
MARINE